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ABSTRACT

Academic program review should not be considered a new phenomenon in higher education; reviews of various types have been conducted on a continuing basis. The renewed importance of an organized effort has been stimulated by the inability of funding sources to maintain levels of support required to insure quality in all on-going programs. Current approaches to academic program review exhibit a broad range of activities. Concerns about academic program review exist with administration, faculty, and students. In general, the seriousness of these concerns depends on the level of understanding about the concepts and objectives of the program review. The primary justification for academic program review is the maintenance of excellence in university programs. This goal can be achieved by assuring that the appropriate programs receive sufficient levels of support. (Author/KE)

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Academic Program Review -- Concerns and Justification

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Associate Dean of the Graduate School

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Hopefully, the analysis and ideas presented in this paper will be of value to others involved in the challenging process of program evaluation and review. The experiences associated with collecting the information have been stimulating and educational to the author.

Higher education has evolved from a period of rapid growth toward a period of steady-state, or possibly, declining enrollment. The impact of this evolution, as well as many other economic and sociological pressures, has resulted in a period in history when the value of higher education is being questioned more than at any previous time. The exact response to this challenge is difficult to predict due to the complex relationships among the various factors involved. It seems obvious that all segments of society are demanding accountability in higher education, as well as other agencies. Although accountability requires evaluation and/or review, higher education seems unprepared to cope with new demands which require measurement of output on other than a quantitative basis.

There are numerous specific factors which are contributing to the need for academic program review. Total enrollments are no longer increasing at rates comparable to the 1950's and future predictions indicate steady-state or declining enrollments. For state-supported institutions, with subsidy models designed for enrollment growth periods, the ability to maintain or enhance quality of all existing academic programs is seriously threatened. Obviously, this factor is magnified in importance by the current economic climate which is placing even more budgeting constraints on state governments. The same economic pressures exist within the institution, with inflation causing fixed costs to increase at rates which may require diversion of funds from academic programs.

All of the current economic pressures are occurring at a point in time when the attitude of society toward higher education is much less than optimum. After many years of nearly unquestioning support for higher education, society is now requesting more specific information on the values of education. It must be assumed that these questions are being asked due to the attitudes in society that higher education has not been sufficiently concerned with obtaining solutions to current and relevant problems. Although this issue may be debatable, the concern exists and can be dealt with only by providing measures of accountability.

The establishment of a firm basis for accountability in higher education can be achieved through detailed analysis -

program review. As indicated in the Preliminary Report¹ by the Study Committee on Program Evaluation at the University of Illinois, the process involves three steps:

- (a) An analysis of the program's mission and a comparison with objectives of the entire institution,
- (b) A definition of evaluation criteria and development of specific indicators for measurement, and
- (c) A procedure for observation of indicators, evaluation of criteria for the program and development of recommendations.

It must be emphasized that detailed reviews of the type described have not been conducted extensively in higher education and the optimum mechanism for conducting the review has not evolved.

The term "program" can be defined in several different ways. For purposes of this paper, academic programs will be defined in a manner consistent with the administrative structure of a comprehensive university. In most cases, the department unit would best represent an academic program, while in other situations specific curriculum will represent the program. The term "review" implies analysis of considerable depth on all aspects of a program. The emphasis is on program "quality" or "need" factors, which may not be considered in a program evaluation. In addition, the implementation of recommendations following an evaluation should be considered an important phase of the review process. Obviously, evaluation will be a significant portion of the program review, but may not represent the best description of the entire process.

Although academic program review must be considered difficult in any situation, the complexities of a comprehensive university create unique problems. The scope of the entire process is significant due to the size of individual programs,

¹ A Study of Program Evaluation. Preliminary Report by the Study Committee on Program Evaluation, the University of Illinois - March, 1975 pp. 5

as well as the number of programs to be reviewed. The diversity in types of programs is an additional factor. These differences create significant problems in development of uniform evaluation criteria for all programs, as well as in assessment of relative program quality. The differences extend to variations in administration of programs which introduce concerns during implementation of program review recommendations.

It is not the intention of this paper to deal with evaluation criteria, mechanisms for review or similar aspects of the process. These factors will vary considerably from one institution to another. The primary objectives of this paper are:

- (a) To analyze and discuss concerns generated by program review, and
- (b) To develop a sound justification for review of academic programs.

Most of the references in this paper are to experiences at comprehensive universities and many of the ideas to be presented were collected at a comprehensive university. It is anticipated, however, that the concerns expressed are not significantly different in other institutions of higher education. In addition, the justification for academic program review should have uniform application throughout post-secondary education.

APPROACHES TO ACADEMIC PROGRAM REVIEW:

Various approaches to academic program review are evident in a limited survey of medium-to-large universities. The differences which exist reflect many factors related to both internal and external pressures on the institution in recent years. In general, there is a definite trend toward the use of processes which allow the universities to respond more effectively to those segments of society which desire more accountability in higher education.

One approach to academic program review, which has evolved in recent years, has occurred at the initiative of state agencies responsible for higher education. Although the

approach occurs to varying degrees, depending on the role of the agencies, there seems to be more frequent examples of reviews which lead to recommendations for elimination of one or more programs within the system controlled by the state agency. A recent example was the termination of Ph.D. programs in chemistry and history at four different universities in New York². These decisions were based on an evaluation of programs by the State Education Department using external reviewers and supporting materials to develop a rating for the reviewed programs. A similar approach is followed in the State of Washington, where the Council on Higher Education reviews programs throughout the state on five-year intervals.³

At many universities, academic program review occurs on a very informal basis. Many programs are reviewed in considerable depth by teams of peers who represent accreditation agencies. The results of the reviews are normally presented in the form of recommendations which would lead to improvement of existing programs. Proper interpretation of these recommendations can be of considerable value to administrative groups involved in program review. University-wide accreditation processes can provide limited insight into programs which are not reviewed individually by accreditation groups.

A third approach being followed at universities interested in program review is more thorough interpretation of internal evaluation groups. In situations such as the University of Minnesota,⁴ routine graduate program reviews have been expanded to include undergraduate program reviews within the College of Liberal Arts. An additional modification normally required in these situations is the development of a procedure for implementations of the recommendations generated by the review.

² New York Times, 15 November 1974

³ Personal communication from Carl W. Hall, Dean of Engineering, Washington State University, December 26, 1974

⁴ Personal communication from A. J. Linck, Acting Vice President for Academic Affairs, University of Minnesota, January 9, 1975

A formal, but unstructured, process would best describe the fourth approach to program review. In these situations, the decision on in-depth review of a given program is made by central administration based on a variety of inputs. After initiation of the process, the in-depth review may involve different approaches; including faculty groups or teams of administrators. The purpose of the review is normally to identify specific reasons for weaknesses in a program and to collect more information to justify continuance of a program. The basis for selection of a given program for review may include both qualitative and quantitative inputs (obtained through an Office of Institutional Research⁵) or only quantitative data. In the latter case, the purpose of the in-depth review is to obtain qualitative information.

The most elaborate procedures for academic program review are described in the University of Illinois Study of Program Evaluation,⁶ the Program Evaluation Committee Report from the University of Michigan⁷ and the Princeton University Budgeting and Resource Allocation Report.⁸ These reports describe formal and structured procedures for program review, as well as the supporting information to justify the approach being proposed in each case. In general, these procedures involve the use of either internal or external review committees or both, the establishment and the use of a set criteria for all programs and an attempt to assure implementation of recommendations from the review.

ANALYSIS OF CONCERNS ABOUT PROGRAM REVIEW:

The concerns about academic program review within the university community can be numerous if the concepts and objectives are not understood. These concerns must be considered and recognized when any system for program review is initiated

⁵ Personal communication from Thomas M. Freeman, Associate Director, Office of Institutional Research, Michigan State University, January 3, 1975

⁶ University of Illinois Report

⁷ Program Evaluation Committee Report, Office of Budgets and Planning, University of Michigan - 1974

⁸ Budgeting and Resource Allocation at Princeton University, Report of a Demonstration Project - June, 1972

in order to assure the success of the review. In most situations, recognition of those concerns by everyone involved in the review process will assist in creating an appropriate climate for the process.

General Concerns: A general concern about program review is the mechanism for initiation of the process. Unless specific guidelines are established in order to identify the sequence of program review, the process may create unnecessary emotional reactions due to an arbitrary selection of programs to be reviewed. There may be obvious times, such as during an accreditation review, when an academic program review would not significantly add to the data collection process. Such circumstances would include accreditation visits, chairperson reviews and the timing of existing internal reviews for a given administrative unit. Regardless of the approach used to select a program for review, those faculty associated with the program should be notified well in advance of the time for the review. Adequate time should be allowed for the unit to adequately prepare the information needed for review.

A somewhat more serious general concern is the use of uniform criteria for evaluation of all programs in a comprehensive university. A reviewer is concerned about accurate evaluation of a program based on general criteria with specific guidelines. Faculty associated with the program being reviewed feel that general criteria will overlook specific and unique features in the program.

In the proposal of a set of five uniform and general criteria for program evaluation, the University of Illinois Report⁹ emphasized that the list of criteria should be as short as possible and that they should be independent of one another. The report added that use of more than three or four points on a point rating scale was unrealistic in terms of either objective measurement or decision-making. In order to assist the reviewer in rating programs, according to the proposed criteria, the University of Illinois Report provided indicators for each criteria for use in an evaluation of programs. These

⁹University of Illinois Report, pp 12-14

indicators could vary somewhat with the type of program being evaluated. The University of Michigan report¹⁰ and the Princeton report¹¹ are somewhat less specific and propose questions to be presented to each program. The reviewer uses the responses to these questions in the program evaluation.

It is generally acknowledged that criteria designed to be broadly applicable may be too general to measure specific outcomes.¹² Since these constraints may exist in any situation, the importance must be the recognition of the limitations by both reviewer and those being reviewed. The important fact to be communicated is that an equitable comparison of all programs at a comprehensive university can only be achieved with some set of uniform criteria. The evaluation system should be sufficiently flexible to allow for a limited number of unique criteria for a given program, as well as specific indicators to be used in evaluating the set of uniform criteria.

A concern closely related to criteria is the more specific problem of measuring outputs from higher education. The difficulties in placing a quantitative value on these outputs have been discussed in detail by Bowen.¹³ These limitations emphasize the need for care in dealing with evaluation of any program output. Since the outputs from different programs will be as diverse or more diverse than the programs, the importance of developing appropriate indicators for each evaluation criteria is evident. Hopefully, the indicators for each program would improve as experience with program evaluation is gained.

A definite concern to everyone involved in program review is the cost-benefit ratio of the review process. Since the thrust for initiation of program review occurs at a point in time when support programs is insufficient, the justification for the investment of faculty time in detailed program review seems questionable. Although many intangible program improvements can occur, as a result of periodic self-analysis, recognition that a recovery of part or all of the investment is expected by termination of programs should be clearly understood. The

¹⁰University of Michigan Report, Appendix 2.

¹¹Princeton University Report, pp 109-110.

¹²Rodney T. Hartnett. Accountability in Higher Education - A consideration of some of the problems of assessing college impact. Princeton, N.J., 1971, pp 17-18.

¹³Howard R. Bowen. Outcomes and Future Policy for American Higher Education. Presentation at AAIP Mid-Year Seminar, January 27, 1975.

University of Michigan report¹⁴ emphasized that the investment in a given program review should be related in some manner to the benefits to be achieved, or the costs to be recovered. This approach implies that an in-depth review requiring a significant investment would be initiated only in a limited number of situations. A secondary or less intense review of all programs would be occurring on a continuous basis.

Administrative Concerns: The administrative concerns about academic program review are closely related to the administrative level considered. The concerns of central administration are associated with establishing and maintaining a review process which will provide results consistent with the objectives of the process. These types of concerns must be dealt with throughout the establishment and operation of the review process.

College-level administrations in a comprehensive university are in a unique position in relation to a centralized academic program review. Probably the major concern of this group is the centralized nature of many review processes. Centralized program review tends to reduce college-level input to the entire process; time of review initiation, selection of program to be review, review committee membership and establishment of criteria to be used in the review. Most of these concerns can be dealt with by establishing and/or maintaining appropriate channels of communications between the central group responsible for program review and the college-level administration.

A second concern of college-level administration is implementation procedures. Any centralized approach will suggest that any decisions based on the program review recommendations may be made without in-depth consultation at the college-level. This concern may exist until recognition of the actual process is achieved. Any process which is to be equitable to all programs in a university must be initiated and evaluated at a central location. This does not imply that college-level administration does not or cannot have a significant role in the review process. The success of any review process will require significant support from college administration.

An additional concern from college-level administration deals with objectivity of review committees. In general, it is assumed that faculty members cannot evaluate themselves or their own

¹⁴University of Michigan Report, pp 16.

programs. Both the University of Michigan report¹⁵ and the University of Illinois report¹⁶ acknowledge the limitations of internal review groups. Although external review committees have been used extensively in accreditation reviews and reviews for program improvement, there is no evidence to support the use of external groups in situations involving establishment of priorities for the institution. In fact, the entire review process at Princeton¹⁷ was placed in the hands of a single priorities committee which may or may not have representation from the program being reviewed. It seems evident, based on limited information available, that several factors influence the potential success of an internal review committee for program review. First of all, the committee must have a clear understanding of reasons for the review. Emphasis should be placed on the positive aspects of program review, as well as the potential negative aspects of the program termination. Secondly, the establishment of set criteria and unique indicators for use in evaluating the program tend to reduce the influences of bias by committee members. The third factor to be considered is that although primary responsibility for review is with the internal committee, outside consultants should be used to respond to specific questions and disagreements within the internal review committee. Based on these factors and the recognition of considerable cost associated with external review teams, the support for internal review teams seems appropriate. An additional factor which should be recognized is the significant input requirement by program faculty regardless of the type of review committee used.

A somewhat minor concern of college-level administration is the relationship of a newly imposed program review to an on-going review process within the college or within individual programs. It would seem logical to integrate any university-wide program review with any on-going review at the program level. Although it seems unlikely that an on-going review will have the same objectives, the information generated should be of considerable value. Obviously, any duplication of effort should be avoided.

¹⁵University of Michigan Report, pp 17.

¹⁶University of Illinois Report, pp 26-27.

¹⁷Princeton University Report, pp 29.

Faculty Concerns: Probably the most evident faculty concern is associated with reviews designed to terminate programs. This emotional issue cannot be ignored due to the inherent influence on morale of all faculty. There are numerous approaches to assist in reducing this concern to a minimum. One approach is the communication of developments as they occur during the planning for academic program review. These opportunities for exchange of information on the subject can be accomplished in several ways. The University of Illinois¹⁸ and the University of Michigan¹⁹ reports illustrate one approach: that of involving faculty in the planning phases for program review. An alternate approach is periodic communication of developments to an appropriate faculty committee to assure opportunity for reaction during these developments.

A second approach to reducing the emotional impact of program review is by providing incentives for self-analysis, as suggested in the University of Illinois report.²⁰ Such self-analysis by individual programs or administrative units which resulted in cost-savings would be rewarded for innovative and quality improvement. An additional approach to reducing this particular faculty concern is through adequate faculty involvement in the review process. Faculty involvement at the program level seems essential to avoid faculty concerns about judgment without opportunity to express opinions.

A faculty concern closely related to the previous concern is the actual mechanism for faculty involvement in the program review process. This particular concern will exist at the initiation of review before faculty have had an opportunity to observe the extent of involvement, ranging from preparation of materials to be evaluated by the review team to active involvement on internal review committees. The mechanism which is most appropriate will depend on other factors associated with the review.

Credibility of program review is a concern which will vary in intensity depending on faculty experiences with previous reviews. Although there can be no guarantee concerning the credibility of

¹⁸University of Illinois Report, pp i-iii.

¹⁹University of Michigan Report, pp 1-3.

²⁰University of Illinois Report, pp 7.

a review process, an attempt should be made to build an implementation assurance into the review process.

As stated in the University of Michigan report,²¹ "the long term effectiveness of a system of program evaluation depends on individual evaluations actually contributing to decisions and on the decisions being implemented." The approach at the University of Illinois, as explained by Associate Vice-Chancellor, Harold W. Hake²², utilizes a series of reports which ultimately result in recommendations to the appropriate administrative office for final implementation. Although actions taken by administration will be obvious, those faculty associated with the reviewed program will have received copies of a Summary Report issued by the task group which was reviewed by the program and an Action Report to be issued by the centralized program evaluation council. In general, it would seem that procedures of the type described provide the required assurance to faculty that time and effort devoted to a review process is resulting in recommendations which are receiving serious consideration.

An additional factor which tends to reduce faculty concerns related to credibility of reviews is recognition that all programs, non-academic as well as academic, are receiving the same attention. Although such reviews may be conducted on a continuous basis, faculty should be kept aware of developments which are occurring in non-academic areas.

Student Concerns: Any process which may influence academic programs should provide for expression of student views. Certainly, the review of academic programs which could result in termination of programs, represents a concern to students. The opportunities for student involvement may be somewhat more limited than for faculty, but participation on review committees would seem feasible. Review processes at the University of

²¹University of Michigan Report, pp 20.

²²Harold W. Hake. Council on Program Evaluation (COPE) Explained. University of Illinois Campus Report Vol 7, No. 6 - March, 1974.

Illinois²³ and at Princeton University²⁴ provide for student participation on committees involved in evaluation of programs. The University of Illinois report²⁵ adds that students are indispensable in estimating quality of instructional programs.

The major reason for involvement of students in the review process is the impact of a program termination on the students enrolled in that program.

The University of Illinois report²⁶ speaks to this concern by recommending that "procedures must be developed for phasing a program out or consolidating it with others so as to minimize the adverse effects upon students and staff of its elimination." Student involvement in an on-going review process will reduce the potential for premature rumors about the future of a program. Every effort must be made to avoid prejudgment by potential students; a development which could weaken a program as a result of the review process.

JUSTIFICATION FOR ACADEMIC PROGRAM REVIEW:

The majority of the concerns about academic program review are reactions to reviews which result in program termination. Although program termination is a potential result of review, the basic concepts of the review process are valid for many other reasons. The timing of the initiation of interest in program review focuses undue attention on only one of the alternative results. As emphasized in the University of Michigan report²⁷,

²³University of Illinois Report, pp 28.

²⁴Princeton University Report, pp 29.

²⁵University of Illinois Report, pp 31.

²⁶University of Illinois Report, pp 32.

²⁷University of Michigan Report, pp 8-10.

at least five types of program evaluation activities can be identified:

- (a) Improvement -- A review of major functions,
- (b) Expansion -- Opportunity dollars,
- (c) Retrenchment,
- (d) Leadership Change/Reorganization, and
- (e) Mission/Goal/Cienteles Changes.

It is interesting to note that only one of the five types of activities is associated with program termination. Obviously, some of these activities have been occurring on a continuing basis but in an informal manner. Although the movement of university enrollment from rapid growth to approaching steady-state has stimulated interest in program review, the positive aspects and results of the process should receive equal attention.

Quality Improvement in Academic Programs: Probably the most obvious positive result of academic program review is the opportunity for quality improvement. As Hake²⁸ points out in a quote from An Academic Plan for The Urbana-Champaign Campus "In any activity undertaken on this campus, the pursuit of excellence should be the overriding objective; if resources do not permit both quantitative and qualitative growth, higher priority should be given to program quality." The danger, during periods of leveling resource support and simultaneous inflation, is across-the-board reductions to all programs resulting in corresponding reductions in quality. The only apparent approach to maintaining overall excellence is to carefully select and support those programs which will contribute to the overall excellence of the institution. This approach presents a special challenge to the comprehensive university since previous approaches have been directed toward "being all things for all people." To meet this challenge, difficult decisions must be made and they must be made on the basis of quality. Although these trends may seem threatening to the status of a comprehensive institution, that status should not protect programs which no longer contribute to the mission of the university.

²⁸Harold W. Hake, Campus Report.

One of the difficulties in enhancing overall excellence of a comprehensive university is the identification of programs which need improvement. Dr. Arthur L. Gillis²⁹ indicated that program evaluation has three purposes:

- (a) To determine whether or not a program is effective,
- (b) To determine why a program is effective or why it is not, and
- (c) To provide recommendations to decision-makers as to modification, expansion or continuation of a program.

It seems evident that academic program review is an essential process in the improvement of academic program quality during periods of steady-state enrollment and economic inflation.

Resource Funding Justification: Although the communication of appropriate descriptive information about comprehensive university programs to funding sources has always been difficult, the importance of this communication was reduced during periods of rapid enrollment growth. Currently, the communication problem is magnified not only by leveling enrollment but by increased concerns about the responsiveness of universities to social problems. As emphasized in the University of Michigan report³⁰, the concern of external funding agencies is closely related to the credibility gap between higher education and its several publics.

An appropriate type of academic program review should be of considerable value in generating information needed for program description and justification. Although the types of information generated by program review would be of a qualitative nature, it would seem that appropriate interpretation of this information would be of considerable value in support of funding requests to Federal, State, private and alumni sources.

²⁹Dr. Arthur L. Gillis, Program Evaluation - From Question to Impact. Presented at Upper Midwest Conference on Institutional Research, University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire. November 6-7, 1974.

³⁰University of Michigan Report, pp 5.

Internal Resource Allocation: One of the more sensitive and yet critical decisions made by administrators is the allocation of resources within the university. Often, the basis for making these decisions is not obvious and become difficult to justify to groups outside the university as well as groups within the university. In recent years, the trend has been toward basing internal resource allocation on quantitative indicators for units within the university. In general, systems of this type suggest increases in funding support for units with increasing enrollment while decreasing support to units with declining enrollment. It seems relatively obvious that strict long-term adherence to such a resource allocation system would result in loss of quality of all programs. Usually, judgments on program quality are introduced by administration to assure that shifts in resources are appropriate.

The availability of qualitative information such as generated by academic program review should be of considerable value in making internal resource allocation decisions. These types of information should provide a much needed balance, with the abundance of quantitative information which can be generated much more readily. Decisions based on a balance of quantitative and qualitative information should contribute significantly to the long-term goals of enhancing excellence in the comprehensive university.

Evolution of New Programs: Periods of budgetary constraints usually lead to a moratorium on approval of new programs. Although this may be an acceptable solution in the short term, the long range implications must be considered undesirable. The viability of a comprehensive university depends on the stimulation provided by new ideas and programs which are proposed as a result of new ideas. In addition, any long-term moratorium on new programs will result in an even more serious credibility gap with funding agencies and groups.

Academic program review provides an opportunity for evolution of new programs; even during periods of limited support. Presumably, the termination of a program as a result of program review should provide an opportunity to propose a new program. In addition, new programs will often evolve from old programs as a result of program review. This stimulation should be of considerable value in gaining the support of faculty for

program review. It seems logical that opportunities for new programs should represent an incentive for self-analysis in many situations.

SUMMARY:

Academic program review should not be considered a new phenomenon in higher education; reviews of various types have been conducted on a continuing basis. The renewed importance of an organized effort has been stimulated by the inability of funding sources to maintain levels of support required to maintain quality in all on-going programs.

Current approaches to academic program review exhibit a broad range of activities. In some states, agencies responsible for higher education are taking an active role in review of existing programs. In other situations, the universities are establishing formal and structured procedures for internal review. Between the two extremes, there are various levels of activity.

Concerns about academic program review exist with administration, faculty and students. Common concerns include:

- (a) The mechanism of initiation of academic program review,
- (b) The application of uniform evaluation criteria to all programs in a comprehensive university,
- (c) The accurate measurement of outputs from higher education, and
- (d) The cost-benefit ratio associated with the review process.

In general, the seriousness of these concerns depends on the level of understanding about the concepts and objectives of the program review.

The primary justification for academic program review is the maintenance of excellence in university programs. This goal can be achieved by assuring that the appropriate programs receive sufficient levels of support. Additional positive results of program review include:

- (a) Providing a sound base for resource allocation decisions,
- (b) Providing a better basis for communication to external funding agencies and groups, and
- (c) Providing an opportunity for evolution of new programs.